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ABSTRACT

This paper reports findings from a series of focus groups with seven parents, six middle school girls, and four elementary school teachers in a high poverty urban neighborhood. The study began with the purpose of identifying the characteristics of exemplary teachers in low-income urban schools. As the research continued, it became apparent that the answer was straightforward--exemplary urban teachers are those who construct respectful and trusting relationships with students and their families. The paper illustrates the value of triangulating data collection to understand issues of teaching and learning in urban schools better. Being positive with children was the theme that dominated parent discussion, and parents appealed for good communication with their children's teachers. Teachers agreed about the importance of parental involvement in children's education, and they knew that they were unsuccessful in this aspect of their teaching. Students spoke about basic issues of respect and comfort. Triangulating these data helped researchers build a description of the qualities of effective urban teachers. It was clear that a barrier existed between parents and teachers in this study. Caught in the middle of parent-teacher conflict, the students appreciated teachers who expressed interest in their lives. (Contains 29 references.) (SLD)

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The Characteristics of Effective Teachers in High Poverty Schools - Triangulating Our Data

Paper for Roundtable Discussion at the Annual Meeting of the

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On a warm spring evening we gathered with a group of urban parents at a nearby housing project. One African American mother shared her feelings about her daughter's teachers: "I like it when teachers look for the positive in kids. Everyone has something positive...Teachers need to look for the positive [in children]." Yet all too sadly, these parents rarely heard about their children's good qualities -- far more frequently, teachers only contacted them to report discipline or learning problems in school.

This paper reports our findings from a series of focus groups with parents, children and teachers in a high poverty urban neighborhood. We began this study with the purpose of identifying the characteristics of exemplary teachers in low-income urban schools and anticipated a complex set of answers to our inquiry. Yet as we spoke with our informants we discovered a rather basic and straightforward answer to our questions -- exemplary urban teachers are those who construct respectful and trusting relationships with children and their families. This paper illustrates the value of triangulating data collection to better understand issues of teaching and learning in urban schools.

Review of Related Literature

Despite the increasing wealth of the country, low income children still obtain a more inferior education than their middle and upper income counterparts. A recent cover story in the New York Times (Traub, 2000) reported that Head Start, Title I, and intensive reading programs have had little impact on the academic careers of children from high poverty neighborhoods. The problem is compounded further by institutional racism -- African American and Latino children suffer from school programs that are disconnected from their family and community backgrounds. That is, rarely do urban school curricula relate to children's ethnicity and heritage, only infrequently do classroom teachers incorporate cultural styles of communicating and learning (Au and Mason, 1981; Ladson-Billings, 1984), and typically the institutions themselves impede African American and Latino families from participating in their children's education (Comer, Haynes, Joyner, & Ben-Avie, 1996).

Certainly, there are urban teachers who are highly effective and well-respected by students and families (Dyson, 1997; Haberman, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994). In fact, there are many provocative narratives of masterful teachers in high poverty, urban schools -- their stories illustrate how teachers can make a difference in children's lives. For example, Marva Collins (Collins & Tamarkin, 1982) describes how her traditional curriculum combined with high learning expectations have produced extraordinary achievements among Chicago's poorest children. Clark's (Clark & Picard, 1989) personal beliefs and energies regarding school discipline dramatically improved student attendance and conduct at an inner-city school previously known for its disorder. Other studies of effective urban teachers have found certain personal qualities to be helpful for succeeding in high poverty classrooms; these qualities pertain to the teacher's willingness to learn children's cultural backgrounds, hold high expectations for all students' learning, be unintimidated with school bureaucracies, network with other effective teachers and connect in varied ways to the community (Dyson, 1997; Haberman, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Families have a significant impact on their children's education. Comer, Haynes, Joyner & Ben-Avie (1996) have shown how parent involvement, even in the most poverty stricken schools, can have positive impact on a school's climate and children's academic performance. When urban parents of children from K-2 classrooms were successfully involved in school activities, their children academically outperformed children from families who were not participating (Hampton, Mumford & Bond, 1998). Delpit (1992) has argued that families can serve as informants to help interpret children's cultural and community knowledge for classroom teachers. Durkin (1966) found that children who learn to read before attending school are likely to have been exposed to many literacy opportunities at home. Clark (1976) illustrated how school success is often connected to children's learning opportunities at home. Even listening to stories at home by care givers has been found to correlate significantly with children's language and reading growth (Wells, 1985). Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, and Hemphill (1991) found that children's

literacy performance improved when parents were in frequent contact with teachers.

Three widely known intervention programs have strong family involvement components. Success for All (Slavin, Madden, Karweit, Dolan, & Wasik, 1992) contains an outreach component to maintain family involvement in children's classroom instruction. Reading Recovery (Clay, 1985) invites parents to observe and participate in their children's literacy education so that they can become active supporters of teachers' literacy lessons. Comer's (Comer et al., 1996) program involves direct parent participation at all levels of school decision-making, including decisions about curriculum and instruction.

Cultural conflicts between home and school may contribute to children's learning difficulties. Au & Mason (1981) found when teachers' conversation styles resemble that of the community, children are more able and eager to participate in classroom discussions. Heath (1983) discovered that children will achieve more when their home language patterns and values for literacy resemble that of the school. Non-verbal behaviors represent cultural patterns of interacting, as well -- Cazden (1988) showed that teachers who are familiar with children's conversational styles, including the uses of silence, are more successful in their instruction than teachers who are not.

Urban teachers often have great difficulty involving families in school events. Baker, Kessler-Sklar, Piotrkowski, and Parker (1999) discovered that teachers have limited knowledge of what parents do at home to help children in school. The teachers in their study complained that they lacked the time and opportunity to learn about children's families. Pianta, Cox, Taylor, and Early (1999) applied the concepts of "high intensity" and "low intensity" involvement with parents to explain teacher interactions. They found that most teacher communication with low income urban families consisted of "low intensity" letters and flyers with little actual interaction with parents. As the number of African American and Latino children increased in a school, few "high intensity" teacher contacts with families ever took place. Linek (1997) found that many urban teachers believe that minority parents don't care about their children's education. These teachers often possess a

"We -Them" attitude toward parent involvement in school activities -- teachers do not consider parents as collaborators in their children's education.

There are many varied recommendations for improving teachers' skills for communicating with low income urban families. De Acosta (1996) argues for broadening student teachers' understanding of the importance of family involvement. She recommends placing prospective teachers in urban community agencies so the students learn about the issues and conflicts that urban families frequently encounter. Koerner and Hulsebosh (1996) describe a curricula to engage teachers in personal reflection and discussion about family diversity. They contend that teachers must first understand their own values and attitudes toward diversity before they can be expected to communicate effectively with urban parents. French (1996) describes a special education course, Collaboration With Families, which provides teachers with important skills and strategies to interact effectively with families.

In this paper we examined the following questions:

- What are the characteristics and qualities of effective teachers in high poverty schools from the perspective of parents who send their children to these schools?
- In what ways do parents', teachers', and students' thoughts concur or differ about the qualities of exemplary urban teachers?

Method

A qualitative research method was used for our study. Focus groups were chosen as our research strategy because we anticipated that they would offer a non-threatening and comfortable social context when interviewing people who have been alienated from the public education system. The social support and camaraderie of focus groups might help the informants when conversing with researchers who are outside of their socio-cultural communities. We knew our social roles and color (college faculty and European American) would foster suspicion among low-income people of color, but a group context might be more conducive for establishing an easy going conversation than a one-to-one interview would. In addition, focus groups are known to be

a valid and efficient data collection strategy (Krathwohl, 1997). Years ago, for example, Labov (1972) realized that group interviews would elicit richer linguistic information with urban, African American adolescents than individual encounters.

Three groups of informants constituted our focus groups: We used one group of parents, another of teachers and a third group of middle school students. In reality, the role of teachers participating in that focus group was somewhat broader than the others, because they served more as research participants who helped guide and direct our discussion about the characteristics of exemplary urban practitioners. We had worked with these teachers for many years.

The Urban Setting

We conducted the study in a small Northeastern city. Like many cities throughout the Northeast, this small city has undergone a collapse of its century old industry, in its case, textiles. As its factories moved out, downtown buildings that previously contained bustling restaurants and department stores closed. The city's population decreased from nearly 100,000 at the turn of the 20th century to about 60,000 at the present time. This has coincided with an increasing minority population of African Americans and Latinos.

Our college is located in the city's downtown neighborhood. Comprising about four city blocks the college presents an urban campus with brick and brownstone buildings and small green spaces. One block from the college stand four high rise public housing buildings with approximately four hundred families. Ninety-five percent of the children living there are African American and Puerto Rican. There is a good deal of interaction between the college community and residents of the housing project, taking place in the context of practica assignments in the students' college course work.

A few years ago the city school district integrated its elementary schools. The elementary building serving the downtown housing project had become increasingly comprised of high poverty, children of color. Consequently, the district began bussing children from the downtown housing project to a more affluent elementary school that is located on the hill in one of the city's

remaining middle class neighborhoods.

The Focus Groups

Teachers comprised our first focus group, and it met on May 15th and October 16th of 1998. Four highly effective and experienced elementary teachers participated. These teachers came from three different elementary buildings in one northeastern urban district. The poverty levels of the urban schools where the teachers worked ranged from 83% to 90% (New York State Education Department, 1998). African American and Latino children comprised one third to one half the student population in the urban buildings. We identified the teachers from our own observations and from independently corroborated recommendations of informants in the schools we studied.

The parent focus group for this study met on June 10, 1999. All the parents lived in the high rise public housing project. We contacted the parents through an after-school arts and literacy project where children are tutored by college students. A teacher from the arts and literacy program served as our mediator and contact with the parents. We had casually known a few of the parents because of their children's participation in the after-school tutoring program which we supervised.

We first explained to the parents in writing that we wanted to know their thoughts about their children's best teachers. Seven women, six of color and one white, whose children attended the public school on the hill voluntarily participated in the focus group. This focus group met in a second floor room of the public housing project and lasted for one and a half hours.

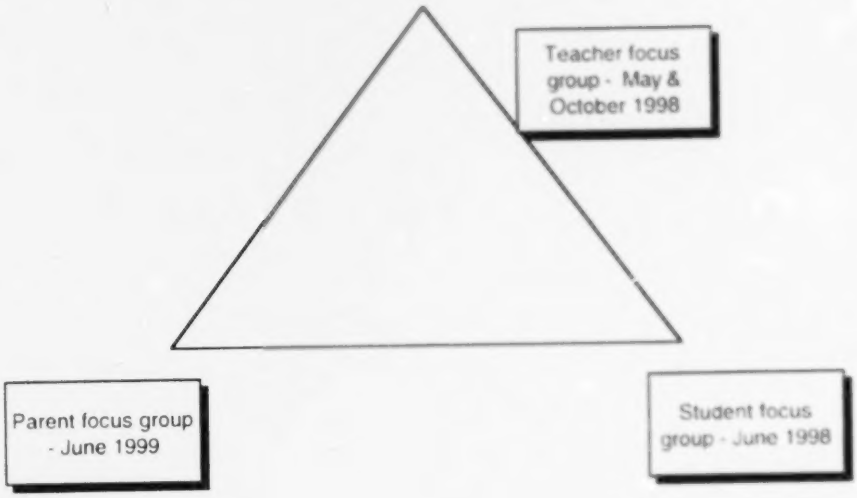
Six middle school girls formed the third focus group which met on June 16th, 1998. All the girls were African American or Latina. Two of the girls recently graduated from fifth grade and were moving to the middle school in September. The other girls were in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grade. At the time of the study all the girls participated in a college practicum for graduate students in our literacy program. The focus group took place in a college classroom that was adjacent to the public housing project where the girls lived.

Data Collection Procedures

We planned each focus group by constructing a series of open-ended questions to ask the

participants. Wie explained to the parents that we were interested in their thoughts about their children's best teachers. Parents built upon what each other said and the conversation became rich and energetic. For the teachers our planned questions explored issues about cultural responsiveness, language diversity, and methods of teaching in low income schools. We asked the children questions about their thoughts and experiences with their favorite elementary teachers.

Figure 1: Triangulating the Data



During each focus group one researcher assumed primary responsibility for facilitating discussion while the other took notes. We changed research roles whenever the flow of discussion merited it, but each researcher prepared his/her own notes of the focus groups. The notes consisted of verbatim, paraphrased, and reflective entries from the sessions. Later we filled in our notes and compared them to establish descriptive validity. We analyzed the notes by testing for emerging categories, patterns and themes that we detected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We used pseudonyms throughout the paper.

This study began nearly two years ago when we held the focus groups with the teachers.

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However, each time we gathered data, more questions emerged. After interviewing the teachers, for example, we wanted to know what children thought were the qualities of exemplary teachers. But after we met with the children we realized we needed to hear the voices of parents. Consequently, as the study evolved we added data from three independent sources. We know this triangulation gives us greater validity in our interpretations than one or two sources would have allowed.

Results

We first present our data from our parent focus group. Then we share our findings from the teachers and conclude with data from the student focus group.

Data from the Parent Focus Group

Parents shared specific and strong beliefs about the qualities of their children's best teachers. They often thought about their children's education, and they agreed that their children have had some good teachers in local schools. Several parents spoke about a kindergarten teacher who was particularly kind to their children; although she was strict, she looked for positive qualities in children. Good teachers complimented children frequently about their work and made children feel good about being in school. Parents believed the best teachers "did not look for negative issues with children." The best teachers communicated frequently through notes and telephone conversations with the parents.

Being positive with children was the theme that dominated parent discussion. One parent said, "I like it when teachers look for the positive in kids. Everyone has something positive. Children pick up on it. Children like compliments. Teachers need to look for the positive." Conversely, the parents repeatedly spoke about how the only communication that they typically received from school was negative. They shared anecdotes about school suspensions, placement of their children in special education programs, and retention. One particularly articulate parent, who recently completed an MSW degree at the local university, shared her frustration with her daughter's school: She was "...sick of hearing the word 'immaturity.' This word was a code

(word) to retain kids." She said it was used to retain children of color, "They track my child by saying she is immature. It is the same negativity!" She told the other parents they should not feel "intimidated by school...I know they don't make you feel comfortable...They throw language at you ...How many black kids did Piaget study? It makes you feel uncomfortable...teachers should communicate so you understand...teachers need to be creative...build on what my daughter knows...I had some fights with her teacher...Parents should not back off, I don't care what they (the teachers) think of me..."

Parents appealed for good communication skills in their children's teachers. Parents liked teachers who sent home weekly newsletters or notes. They appreciated phone calls and loved it when teachers visited the afternoon tutoring program in the housing project, as a guidance counselor and kindergarten teacher had recently done. Parents discussed how communication difficulties were a major problem with their children's school. "Last year I didn't know that my child was doing poorly. The report card said everything was good, yet at the end of the year, she said my child needed to be left back. This year the same thing is happening. They keep telling me everything is good until the end of the year, he is left back." Another parent echoed a similar feeling about her child's teacher, "Same thing with Tonya, I didn't know. They never let you know... Never once told me she wasn't doing well. They don't tell me what's going on. This year I know how my daughter is doing." Another mother said, "No mother wants to hear her child is doing badly, I want to know how to help...constructive criticism...come up with a plan!"

Although we tried to redirect the discussion, parents spoke far more about negative experiences with urban teachers than positive. Unanimously, the parents said they felt unwelcome and uncomfortable in the school to which their children were bussed. They complained that many of the teachers "spoke down" to them, some "brushed them off," and others did not answer their questions. One of the parents shared how she felt a teacher was condescending to her and her daughter, Alena. The family has an eye disorder that has been passed down through at least three generations, but she said it had no relationship to intelligence. The grandfather, mother, and Alena

had the same eye disorder that gives an unusual visual appearance that many people interpret as being uninvolved and distant. In February of this year Alena's third grade teacher said Alena needed to be retained. "My child came to school in January, but in February they told me she should be left back - only one month and they decided this! They never gave her a chance...stigmatized!"

Parents said teachers did not like being questioned about their teaching methods. They spoke about the principal who did not speak respectfully with them. They wished the school used interpreters to help with Spanish speaking parents. All the parents wanted to be part of their children's education, but they felt excluded because of negative attitudes they perceived in teachers. "I feel like dumb going to the school...I'm not comfortable...I don't feel welcome...they don't interpret for me...teachers look at us as beggars..." Parents attributed these problems to teachers having poor communication skills and lack of respect for Latino and African American people.

The parents agreed about their experiences with one teacher whom they liked. This teacher frequently sent notes home to the parents. The teacher "affirmed my child." Mrs. DeSantis is "really good." One mother added that this teacher taught Liz to express her feelings. Mrs. De Santis drew "happy faces" on her work; she sent notes home about Liz and kept me informed. Another mother said, she gives positive reinforcement. She recognized my child as "star of the month!" They said Mrs. DeSantis even came to visit the housing project to see the after school program there. One mother said, "Mrs. DeSantis stayed in contact with me, even after Liz was promoted to the next grade. Mrs. DeSantis left space on her notes for me to write back." She "emphasized choices for kindergartners ..but some people say too rigid...keeps them at their desks, but I like her."

Good communication skills and respect for children and their families reappeared as the most desirable teacher characteristics for these parents. These qualities ran throughout the focus group discussion and were evidenced in each of their anecdotes. Yet they also wanted teachers who knew how to teach their children well. They wanted teachers who would be "kind but strict,"

they did not want their children "babied." Their children needed to be "pushed to the limit," but done in ways to make "learning fun." For example, like learning a "rap song would be fun!" "Some teachers," one parent said, "baby the kids so much the children believe they are inferior."

Data from the Teacher Focus Groups

The teachers agreed about the importance of parental involvement in children's education, but they knew they were unsuccessful in this aspect of their teaching. Teachers thought the mobility of low-income urban people contributed to lack of parent involvement in school activities. Diane said that the composition of children in many classrooms changed by half over the course of an academic year. Dorothy explained that the transiency of families, as well as their alienation from the educational system, explained the lack of family involvement in school events. "Maybe the difference is that in my school's community the families are transitional. Parents are new to the community and many of them move in and out of it (over the course of the school year)...

Frustration characterized many of the teachers' statements about parental involvement. "We have trouble getting them to conferences... They are always working," Meg complained. The teachers acknowledged the importance of involving parents in family literacy events, but they admitted they did not have success with it. "We need to teach parents again...we have tried [to teach them about literacy activities]...but many of the parents are so young, and they are afraid to come to school because of their own [poor] school experiences."

Dorothy gave specific examples of the lack of parental involvement in her school's recent Open House: "...this year I only had five out of 19 parents attend. Last year it was worse, with only one parent attending. So, I don't know."

The teachers said that the lack of family involvement in children's education is an increasing problem. The teachers sensed that parents become more resigned and removed from the impersonal forces of the educational system, which was often unresponsive to their children's learning needs. There was general deterioration in family involvement as children progressed through school. "In first grade, parents are actively involved ... they are still clinging to their

children....but in a few years they have bought into the system and they have accepted their children's problems and accepted the system [for good and bad]. "

Unlike many teachers from high poverty schools who often give-up, this group of teachers still held high standards for children's learning. All of the teachers agreed with the comment, "All the children are going to leave my classroom reading!" Similarly, after Meg shared her frustration about getting parents to attend school conferences, she said she would no longer accept excuses: "They may have good excuses for not coming to school, but they are not good enough for me anymore! " Yet at the same time, she voiced her feelings that it was her responsibility to make sure children learn in her classroom. She did not scapegoat and said that she frequently wakes up at 4 in the morning to plan ideas for her teaching.

Teachers shared many interesting comments about integrating children's cultural experiences into their lessons. Meg matter of factly said, "You have to include children's language into your teaching... at my school we have 28 ESL children from Asia, Africa, and South American countries...schools are getting more students from other countries and teachers are incorporating these cultural experiences into their lessons." Dorothy elaborated, "It is the right thing to do. A few years ago several of our teachers received a teacher grant for 'Walk a Mile in My Shoes.'" This was a faculty and student collaboration to study cultural and ethnic differences in their schools. The teachers shared the importance of selecting literature that illustrated the children's cultural backgrounds. Dorothy gave one example of tying literature to children's linguistic backgrounds, "There is a book I like to read to my children.It is by Lois Erhart and it is bilingual."

Teachers emphasized the importance of integrating children's cultural knowledge throughout the curriculum. Diane explained that she used social studies to discuss children's cultural backgrounds by using music, food, literature, dance. ..and guest speakers. I even integrate cultural knowledge into science," Diane added .

Although this focus group consisted of the best urban teachers we knew, they

acknowledged their lack of success at involving families in school activities. Teachers voiced frustration about involving parents in their children's education.

Data from the Students' Focus Group

The students spoke about basic issues of respect and comfort: they liked teachers who were kind to them. They talked about their favorite teachers making personal connections with them. Their favorite teachers created time to speak personally with them, and these teachers took them on field trips and invited children to their homes for picnics and barbecues. The students spoke of one event in which teachers visited their neighborhood, at an annual arts festival held downtown each spring near the housing project.

Speaking personally and not yelling distinguished children's favorite teachers from others. Humor and using a variety of learning activities were additional qualities that the children appreciated. Workload did not seem to affect the students' judgments about their favorite teachers. One of the students talked about a teacher who "pushed" them with a lot of homework, but the student liked the teacher because she learned so much from him. Another student discussed having different kinds of learning activities and not just following a book. Table I displays the positive qualities identified by the children.

Figure 1: Characteristics of Children's Favorite Teachers

- They do not yell
- They are funny
- They are nice
- Share their lives with children by inviting children to their homes
- Talk personally to children
- Use a variety of learning activities

Children looked for basic personal qualities in teachers. They liked teachers who constructed personal, caring relationships with them. Underlying these issues was the respect and trust children felt when in some teachers' classrooms.

Discussion

We triangulated the data in this study to help us construct what we believe is a valid

description of the qualities of effective urban teachers. We learned that the most important quality is a teacher's ability to establish a trusting and respectful relationship with children and their families. Two sources of data in our study point to the importance of such social relationships: Overwhelmingly, children wanted to be liked by teachers, and parents wanted their children to be respected and valued by classroom teachers. However, the teachers, who were among the best practitioners we knew, overlooked the power of personal relationships with children and families, although they did acknowledge the importance of integrating children's cultural backgrounds into their classroom lessons.

Clearly, an invisible barrier existed between parents and teachers in this study. Parents deliberately withdrew from school events because of perceived racism. The parents assumed a "We-Them" attitude about their children's teachers. Whether fairly or not, the parents perceived the public school to be unwelcoming, and social interaction with teachers became painful encounters. Differences in ethnicity, language, income, and the personal educational histories between the African American and Latino families and their children's teachers fueled their alienation.

At the same time teachers in our focus group expressed frustration with parental involvement. Although they knew family participation was critical for their children's academic success, teachers despaired at improving it. But the teachers did not realize that the parents deliberately decided to stop participating in the school activities. Teachers did not know that the parents perceived the school to be racist and bigoted. Even on straightforward matters such as homework, the teachers did not understand the parents perspective. Teachers complained parents did not help children with their homework, but the parents said they did not know what homework teachers assigned their children.

Caught in the middle of the parent and teacher conflict, the urban children appreciated teachers who expressed interest in their lives. Children liked teachers who liked them, who did not yell and made learning interesting. Unfortunately, we inferred that the children were becoming alienated from school because of their lack of excitement and focus about specific subjects, and

their greater attention to the social milieu of school.

Schools are responsible for establishing open communication with parents. Yet, we learned that teachers, even the exemplary ones, expected parents to communicate with the schools in middle class ways, such as telephoning, visiting, and writing notes.

Parents in our focus group felt vulnerable with authority, and they could not comfortably communicate with teachers in ways that white, middle-class families were accustomed. These urban parents did not have cars and could not easily visit the school up on the hill. Some of them spoke Spanish only, and most, we infer, felt anxious about their own writing.

Urban schools must construct alternative ways of connecting and communicating with parents who live in high poverty areas. For example, the conventional "Parents Night" might be placed at a community room in the neighborhood where families live. Schools with children who are acquiring English should plan for interpreters when parents visit.

New teachers need to learn a variety of strategies and skills to involve urban parents in their children's education. Teachers must learn to communicate clearly and sensitively with adults of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. They must learn strategies that allow parents to collaborate in their children's education; evidence from other studies indicates that exemplary teachers view families as collaborators in their children's education (Alvarez & Williams, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1994) and not as clients or adversaries.

Teachers must value diversity and understand the positive effects it can have on classroom atmosphere and children's school achievement. White, middle class teachers must learn to build trusting and respectful relationships with low income people of color, and these strategies may differ from what they are accustomed. Teachers should learn about the ethnicities of the children they will teach and the culturally specific ways of connecting and establishing good relationships within those communities. There should be ethnic diversity in college courses so early in their study to become teachers, students will hear about the perspectives and experiences of people from other ethnicities and cultures.

Communicating effectively in multiethnic communities is essential for today's teachers. From the very beginning of their practica placements prospective teachers should learn the importance of parental participation in children's education and ways to bring it about. Prospective teachers must acquire both "low and high intensity" strategies for communicating and working with urban parents. Introductory course work should help students understand their own values and attitudes about diversity. The same course work should provide them opportunities to see and hear what urban life is like for families in high poverty neighborhoods. After acquiring a better understanding of themselves and others, prospective teachers can develop communication strategies that can make a difference when teaching in urban classrooms.

Methods course work can provide opportunities for new teachers to write notes, letters, and newsletters to families. Prospective teachers must learn how to display value and respect for the cultural backgrounds of families and children. For example, they need to learn how schools should be transformed so that cultural and ethnic diversity is celebrated throughout the school year; such celebrations should be evident in the moment one walks into a building and its classrooms. Teachers should learn to display books and media representing children's cultural backgrounds. Frequent notes and letters to families acknowledging children's strengths are also helpful.

Urban schools might experiment with "looping" models of instruction. With "looping" children remain with the same teacher for two years. So, for example, a first grade teacher would move-up to second grade to follow her students as they are promoted. The advantage of looping in terms of family involvement is that teachers will have greater opportunity to construct long lasting relationships with parents and family members. Less learning time will be lost at the beginning of a school year when the classroom teacher already knows the children and their families.

Prospective teachers need to learn how to conduct effective parent conferences. A conference model such as "Glow and Grow" might help: teachers learn to say something positive about each child and identify one way the child might be helped at home. Teacher education programs should encourage prospective teachers to visit urban communities. Although some

urban neighborhoods are plagued by violence, there are ways teachers can safely visit; for example, teachers might visit community centers, churches and after school programs. Teachers can attend cultural events that are held in urban neighborhoods. These are all gestures that will help break barriers and foster understanding and respect between family and schools.

Finally, we learned the great value of constructing strong, trusting relationships with families and children. Unfortunately, teachers and parents in our study lacked mutual trust and respect. Nieto (1999) argues meaningful relationships between teachers and urban families are at the heart of effective urban teaching. The results of our study support Nieto's argument and indicate that teacher education programs must do far more in preparing teachers to work closely with urban families and their children. The data which we attempted to triangulate overwhelmingly points to the value of strong trusting relationships among teachers, their children and families.

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